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SUBJECT Charges Levelled at Panama Strongman

J JOHN PALMER: On Closeup this morning, more on those new charges of international drug-running, money-laundering, and murder at the very highest levels of the government of Panama. The accusations, in secret American files, are made against Army General Manuel Antonio Noriega, who, in effect, runs Panama and who remains close to the Reagan Administration.

J More on the story now from NBC's chief diplomatic correspondent Marvin Kalb.

MAVIN KALB: This is Roberto Eisenmann, Panama's most prominent publisher, planning soon to return to his country after another self-imposed exile in the United States, to La Prensa, the only independent newspaper in the country. Only this time he is returning against the advice of friends, who demonstrate their concern about a growing government campaign against him and about a recent death threat.

And who do you think would be behind it?

ROBERTO EISENMANN: Oh, most definitely this would only be possible if General Noriega was behind it, because he is in full control of all possibilities with respect to something like that.

KALB: General Manuel Antonio Noriega is a Reagan Administration favorite, the strongman ruler of Panama operating behind a civilian president with little power. Now, for the first time, in closed-door testimony on Capitol Hill, senior officials of the U.S. intelligence community have documented what they say are Noriega's personal ties to the brutal murder of an opposition political leader and to widespread drug-running and

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money-laundering.

These disclosures are a source of deep embarrassment to the Administration, which wants to push democratic reform in Latin America; but in the case of Panama, is more concerned about the security of the canal.

But there is some pressure for change, with the CIA now privately arguing that Noriega must go, that he is bringing the country to ruin, and this may spawn a communist insurgency that could threaten the canal.

This is what U.S. intelligence officials recently told a Senate subcommittee in secret testimony:

First, that Noriega planned and supervised the murder last September 14th of Dr. Hugo Spadafora (?), a popular physician-turned-politician-and-critic. Two officers tortured and beheaded him, and then tossed his body into an old U.S. mail bag. Noriega has resisted all attempts to investigate the killing.

Second, that Noriega is directly involved in drug-running. U.S. intelligence officials cite the fact that Noriega earns \$1200 a month but lives in a well-guarded villa, owns a fleet of expensive cars, flies five or six times a year to Zurich to deposit money in a Swiss bank account, as much as \$100 million.

According to a CIA source, Noriega is also directly involved in arms shipments to left-wing insurgencies in Colombia and El Salvador and to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. He cooperates closely with Libya, Cuba and the PLO. And still the U.S. supports him.

Noriega, though repeatedly asked, has not yet made himself available for an interview on these charges. But his handpicked president has.

PRESIDENT ERIC ARTURO DELVALLE: I think people are -- you know, are exaggerating or passing the word of things that haven't happened.

KALB: As for the Administration's public reaction to these charges, you hear this:

ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE ELLIOTT ABRAMS: It is wrong, inappropriate, foolish for American officials, counter-productive, to discuss accusations against foreign officials.

KALB: In private, some U.S. officials say that although there is no easy alternative to Noriega, there are honest officers in Panama who could be encouraged to work with existing political parties in a democratic way. But it is hard to change U.S. policy. It is easier for the Administration to stick with a strongman, especially when the U.S. is concerned about the canal, about the 9000 American troops there, part of the U.S. Southern Command, and about the possible spread of communism from Nicaragua.

That could affect Panama, and Panama is already in trouble. It is in the grip of deep recession, 20 percent unemployment; and a literate population that is frustrated, angry.

EISENMANN: We are fighting dictatorship in Panama. We will continue fighting dictatorship. Washington will not be able to decide whether we fight or we don't fight. Washington will be able to decide who wins the fight.

KALB: There are obvious parallels with the Philippines. After a return to democracy there, many Panamanians look to the United States for similar help and leadership. But so far, anyway, they are not getting it.